

# THE Nation.

Published on *The Nation* (<http://www.thenation.com>)

## Swing Time: On Morris Dickstein

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You probably don't remember where you were when Lionel Trilling died. But I bet Morris Dickstein does. The death of America's most prominent literary critic on November 5, 1975, made the front page of the *New York Times*--with the story continuing for another 2,000 words after the jump. My friends and I--all Columbia undergraduates at the time--gathered around a bench in the middle of Broadway, not far from Trilling's office, debating the impact of this one man on American literature, an impact that seems unimaginable today. Yet as I read through *Dancing in the Dark*, Dickstein's elegant, evocative and passionate defense of the culture of the Great Depression, I found my thoughts turning again and again to the cool, genteel mandarin whose embrace of the complex ambiguities of literary Modernism, and disdain for the vulgarities of the Popular Front, did so much to shape our sense of the 1930s.

Those readers who, either by birth date or education, escaped the influence of Trilling's Olympian pronouncements may find it difficult to credit or even understand the chilling effect such denigration had on the taste of an entire generation. We still, after all, have literary critics, and some of them--Harold Bloom leaps to mind--are not exactly shrinking violets. But Bloom has always cast himself as the underdog in his many battles, a noisy Jewish outcast railing against the ruling pieties of polite literary society, rubbing our noses in the Oedipal rage of poet against predecessor or the messy sexual personas behind the biblical narrative. And though Bloom and Frank Kermode may be the only living critics with Trilling's range or learning, it is hard to see either of them commanding similar acreage from the press on his way out--or compelling such allegiance even among those of us who delight in their judgments. Nor do any of their younger colleagues seem to aspire to such authority: try to imagine what a "school of James Wood" might look like, and you'll see what I mean.

*Dancing in the Dark* is a book best read slowly, perhaps with a DVD player or YouTube close at hand, so that when Dickstein invokes Fred Astaire's "refusal to dance, and the very dance in which he acts this out" in *Swing Time*, you can see exactly what he means. Yet among its many delights, the pleasure of watching the author, a student of Trilling's in the late 1950s and a longtime contributor to *Partisan Review*, kick over his own traces is far from trivial. This is not Dickstein's first crack at filial rebellion. In *Double Agent*, from 1992, he complained that, owing to Trilling's prejudice, "seminal figures like [Theodore] Dreiser and Richard Wright were relegated to the shabby ghetto of propaganda." And in *Gates of Eden*, published in 1977, Dickstein offered a notably sympathetic account of the culture of the 1960s--a decade the *Partisan Review* crowd regarded with fear and loathing.

True, Dickstein's portrait of the '60s was slanted heavily toward literature (think *Catch-22*, not the Velvet

Underground or Ed Roth), a view from the faculty lounge rather than the streets. As a critic he still seems more comfortable discussing William Faulkner or Richard Wright than Harlem rent parties, the Coit Tower or *Snow White*. But *Dancing in the Dark* doesn't merely offer a series of judgments, any one of which would have been anathema to Dickstein's teachers. By confronting our received--and often condescending--ideas about the 1930s head-on, Dickstein lays the ground for his own far more nuanced and affectionate take on Depression culture. In a way, though, his intellectual demolition work on the decade's detractors is at least as important as any new interpretation, because when it comes to the 1930s, most of us still have a great deal of unlearning to do.

Though we now find ourselves in the second year (counting from the collapse of Lehman Brothers) of the second Great Depression, every day the newspapers remind us that the political facts of the 1930s Depression remain hotly contested. No one denies that a terrifying number of American workers were unemployed in 1932 (12 million; approximately 25 percent of the workforce), or that industrial production and the stock market both fell by staggering amounts; and there is some agreement on what caused the contraction in the first place. But why the United States remained in depression longer than most of Western Europe, or which New Deal measures helped matters and which didn't, or whether the kind of economic collapse immortalized in Dorothea Lange's iconic photographs can ever happen again--on such questions there is endless disputation. And if your view of the political landscape of the 1930s is, like Trilling's, essentially a jaundiced one, the culture that flourished in that same contentious soil is hardly going to be attractive. Even Richard Rovere, in the 1930s an editor of *New Masses* and far to Trilling's left, looked back with distaste on the Depression decade as "cheap and metallic and strident." For Rovere, too, the contrast was between "mandarin or avant-garde" literature and a Popular Front culture, promoted by the Communist Party and its literary fellow travelers, that was "corny and vulgar and innocent of any subtlety."

But it wasn't only ex-Communist penitenti who saw little to applaud. In these very pages Jesse Lemisch derided the left's enduring fascination with folk music from the 1930s onward as inauthentic and symptomatic of a larger failure to engage with American reality (see "I Dreamed I Saw MTV Last Night," October 18, 1986). Though unfairly caricatured as an attack on the whole of Depression culture, Lemisch's dismissal of what he elsewhere called "old-time Popular Front agitprop" didn't offer much encouragement to anyone attempting to get beyond the received view of the decade as one long hootenanny, either.

The definitive historical rebuttal to this skewed picture of the Popular Front's aesthetic legacy was *The Cultural Front*, Michael Denning's masterful examination of the complex weave of political context and cultural practice in the '30s. Denning's book, published in 1997, not only rescued works like *Pins and Needles*, the garment workers' Broadway musical, from the memory hole; it also reminded us that the Orson Welles who made *Citizen Kane* cut his theatrical teeth on the WPA Federal Theatre Project, and that Duke Ellington's *Jump for Joy* was as notable for its political as its musical ambition. From singer Josh White at the Café Society to striking cartoonists at Walt Disney Studios to the novels of Carlos Bulosan and Ernesto Galarza's migrant memoir *Barrio Boy*, Denning underlined the Popular Front's astonishing range of creative accomplishment and political defiance.

But sometimes he protested too much. Denning's fervor to redress decades of contempt and neglect makes *The Cultural Front* an essential corrective to the cold war view of '30s culture as joyless agitprop, fatally weighed down by ersatz piety toward a mythical "people" who took their pleasures in far less politically redeeming pursuits. But that same missionary zeal also led him to overstate the importance of artists and writers who fit neatly into his story at the expense of those whose relationship to labor unions,

the CP or progressive causes generally was less clear-cut. Denning's portrayal of Welles's career as an allegory of anti-fascism is as fascinating as anything written about Welles, and a crucial emendation of the conventional story about an apolitical prodigal who squandered his genius as a shill for Paul Masson wines. Yet the very width of Denning's canvas tends to flatten out critical judgment. Not every work of "ghetto pastoral"--Denning's term for the proletarian coming-of-age novel and its cinematic heirs and assigns, from Mike Gold's *Jews Without Money* to Francis Coppola's *The Godfather*--was quite as ghetto fabulous as Denning suggests. And though *Citizen Kane*'s place in the film pantheon is secure, at the time, and for decades afterward, many more moviegoers, of all classes, took their Depression-era cues from Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers, two artists who barely signify in Denning's account.

Dickstein's generous view of 1930s culture owes much to Denning, Alan Wald (for his own heroic rescue of so much of the literary left) and a host of other curators of cultural memory. But *Dancing in the Dark* aims at something different: "this book traces the tension in thirties culture between a naturalism or populism, with its emphasis on social reality, and a technically innovative modernism, stressing the complications of individual experience." Rather than exalt one at the expense of the other, Dickstein shows how both sides of this tension are inextricably intertwined.

Dickstein recognizes that the ability of working-class Americans to represent themselves was an artistic and political achievement of the first order: "In the cultural wing of the Popular Front, a battery of socially concerned writers, artists, composers, choreographers, and photographers, abetted by the cultural programs of the New Deal, created a left-wing populism that could be urban as well as rural, that lent dignity to common people, recaptured lost elements of America's history and folk heritage, instilled energy and hope into people who were suffering from fear and privation, and tried to bridge gaps of sympathy and understanding between different races, classes, and regions."

Instead of proselytizing on behalf of the Popular Front, though, Dickstein takes its achievements for granted, proceeding to think aloud about what these various representations might tell us about the way the country imagined itself in a time of crisis. Summoning up a "cultural spectacle" that includes documentary photographs, socially conscious novels, screwball comedies, elegant dance films and "jazz-inflected popular music that may be the best America has ever produced," Dickstein argues that "these works give us intimate glimpses of the inner history of the Great Depression, including its plaintive longing for something better, that place at the end of the Yellow Brick Road. They provide us with singular keys to its moral and emotional life, its dream life, its ungarded feelings about the world."

Though earlier approaches to the culture of the 1930s were either polemical or archaeological, Dickstein is persistently, probingly and sympathetically critical, offering fresh readings of works too often either consigned to the dustbin of literary history or dismissed as mere commercial kitsch. Take the case of Mike Gold--cultural commissar of the CPUSA and feared enforcer of literary Stalinism, "a nasty propagandist," writes Dickstein, "who swallowed every shift and betrayal, every violent twist of policy the party sent his way." Dickstein doesn't defend the apparatchik who once dismissed Proust as the "master-masturbator" of bourgeois literature. He merely points out that in *Jews Without Money*, published in 1930 but completed in 1928, Gold "created a powerful style of his own, a style sharply different from [the] documentary naturalism or social realism" he would later champion.

As an example, Dickstein quotes Gold's apostrophe to a "little garbage dump lying forgotten in the midst of tall tenements," admitting that "perhaps on the basis of such passages, the few able literary critics who remember Gold attack him as a sentimentalist and bad stylist." Yet Dickstein continues: "To me Gold's work at such heightened moments takes on some Homeric qualities he assimilated from two of his

favorite writers, Whitman and Tolstoy. From Tolstoy he learned simplicity, directness, a preternatural clarity of outline. (He always insisted that Tolstoy was Hemingway's true teacher.) From Whitman he borrowed the direct Homeric apostrophe, the rolling catalog, the tenderness toward creatures and things that, like this *unforgotten* junkyard, become emblematic of all despised rejects who make up the ghetto."

Far from seeing Gold as at best a sociological curiosity, at worst a literary dead end, Dickstein argues that the "abrupt, impacted sentences and paragraphs" of *Jews Without Money* are "long-limbed lines of prose poetry, overheated, feverishly autobiographical, charged with hyperbole for all their would-be realism. Gold was the missing link between the plebeian Whitman, whom he idolized, and the youthful Allen Ginsberg, who must have read him as a Young Communist in the 1930s or early 1940s." He makes equally interesting observations about Henry Roth--"only on rereading do we discover how much *Call It Sleep* is really written"--and James Agee, who wins our indulgence for his own hyper-purple prose by his willingness to risk "seeming ludicrous by exposing the drama of his own need to be loved and accepted." And though Faulkner doesn't fit any of his categories, *As I Lay Dying*, published in the same year as *Jews Without Money*, "tells another kind of truth about poverty." It's a shame, though, that Dickstein's tolerance for exceptionalism doesn't stretch as far as Wallace Stevens, whose supreme fictions he either caricatures as the work of an "ultimate mandarin" or twists into a kind of premature anti-Modernism. Making the Stevens of *Idea of Order* a social realist *avant la lettre* is quite a stretch, but the criticism of his earlier work is just as unfair.

Yet time and again Dickstein pairs artists from opposite sides of an apparent divide (naturalist/Modernist, populist/avant-garde, documentary/fantasy) only to undermine our ideas about the divide itself, showing, for example, that for Aaron Copland the use of folk elements in ballets such as *Billy the Kid* and *Appalachian Spring* "did not represent a sharp reversal of direction" but had deep roots in both "the modernism of the 1920s" and "the aggressive experimentalism of the early 1930s." Growing naturally out of the same anthropological turn that produced Carl Sandburg's 1927 collection *American Songbag* and Zora Neale Hurston's 1934 folklore anthology *Mules and Men*, this search for the native sources of American culture long predated the Popular Front. (Dickstein also suggests that the increasingly American focus of Copland and the circle around Alfred Stieglitz in New York may have been a response to D.H. Lawrence's "conviction that American writers had sounded a new note in Western culture." By steering Americans back to Whitman and encouraging them to reject European models, "Lawrence," says Dickstein, "had launched the American canon.")

Where Trilling and the *Partisan Review* critics saw in the populism of the 1930s a lamentable and possibly Communist-inspired falling off from the rigors of European High Modernism, Dickstein sees a sophisticated synthesis of commercial forms and folk content that proved uniquely "cathartic for Depression audiences not just by crafting fairy tales of success but by working through the anxieties that give success its resounding immediacy: fears of poverty, solitude, abandonment, loss of hope." As he points out, Hollywood "had always been populist." Responding to the accusation, common currency among the cold war liberals of the 1950s, that Hollywood films of the 1930s furnished escape instead of emotion, sentiment in place of self-awareness, Dickstein offers not John Garfield's *verismo* everyman or the platitudes of Earl Robinson's *Ballad for Americans* but the democratic vistas dramatized by George and Ira Gershwin: "The Gershwins had discovered that effortless elegance did not require a setting amid high society. It was an inner grace that could just as easily be found on Catfish Row.... This kind of style did not put emotions into abeyance; it *was* those emotions. It was knowing rather than sentimental--adult and worldly rather than brain-dead. The Gershwins infused the 32-bar Tin Pan Alley love song with the syncopated rhythms of jazz and the delicious wit of fine light verse to create something fresh, youthful,

and contemporary."

Once in a while Dickstein misses a trick. He describes *Pins and Needles* as "topical and ephemeral," when the musical, certainly topical, was also the longest-running Broadway show in history. *Studs Lonigan* may be "half-forgotten" by today's students, but the trilogy, beloved of Norman Mailer and Pete Hamill, is still in print as a Penguin Classic. And you can only call John Ford's adaptation of *The Grapes of Wrath* "unusually faithful," as Dickstein does, if you overlook the fact that the film has a completely different ending. Nor would I agree with Dickstein that Clifford Odets "held his own" before HUAC; the playwright may have been a combative witness, but his bad temper didn't keep him from naming names.

Still, it's hard to resist any critic who can lament that "Delmore Schwartz never wrote about Woody Guthrie." Especially when, after allowing that "Woody probably never heard of Delmore" either, Dickstein concedes that "the New York intellectuals were surely right about much of what passed for progressive culture" but then goes on to note that "their bitter hostility, so typical of converts, blinded them to genuine expressions of political art, including some of the radical painters and muralists, and of the folk spirit, like Woody Guthrie, just as it blinded them to a deep streak of idealism and radicalism in some who followed the party line through all its demoralizing 'sharp turns.'"

Dickstein is very good on film and even better on that distinctly '30s genre, the showbiz musical. In *42nd Street*, he writes, "beleaguered directors, hard-pressed producers, lascivious backers, overworked hoofers, callow juveniles, egocentric stars, and starving chorus girls somehow manage to pull together, overcoming not only the vicissitudes of show business but the dire economic conditions of the Depression." Films like *Stage Door*, *A Star Is Born* and other "Depression fables," says Dickstein, "lend heft to the endemic optimism of a popular medium by weighing its costs and giving it a convincing emotional truth."

Movies really do record "the dream life of the 1930s" in ways no other form can match--and Dickstein is perhaps at his best in describing how some of the most superficially escapist films of the decade offer not just solace but a subversive sense of social possibility. *The Wizard of Oz*, he writes, "is a Depression road movie. Once [in Oz] the benign Wizard, perhaps a stand-in for FDR, convinces [Dorothy and her friends] they already have these powers within themselves. By working together they discovered their own strength and found their way home."

And though Fred and Ginger may wear formal attire, Dickstein finds a democrat under Fred's top hat: "For Astaire class is motion, energy, pleasure, not static hierarchy. Unlike the upper-class swells in, say, Philip Barry's plays, Astaire is always the entertainer dressing up, relishing his role as a man of the world, never simply the rich man to the manner born.... There is an instinctive democrat at work (and play) behind Astaire's joy in dressing up."

Whereas previous accounts of Depression culture climax with Ma Joad's peroration to "the people!"--or the audience at *Waiting for Lefty* leaping to its feet and shouting, "Strike! Strike! Strike!"--Dickstein delivers a crossover history that underlines just how far his kind of two-way traffic between the Popular Front and mainstream culture can take us: "What Astaire and Rogers transpose into dance, what Gershwin and Cole Porter transform into verbal wit and melodic flow, screwball comedy translates into furious verbal and physical energy, propulsive in its intensity. Had this positive energy been harnessed to some larger social purpose, as the New Deal hoped to do, it might have brought the Depression to a swift end. Expressed as fantasy, it merely made those difficult years more palatable, and left us with many works that testify to the unquenchably vital spirit of those who lived through them."

If you were secretly hoping for revolution, this may come as something of a disappointment--just like the New Deal. Even if you weren't, Dickstein's optimism of the intellect certainly comes as a surprise. But as we again find ourselves whistling past the big, bad wolf of economic hard times, Dickstein reminds us of how much we owe the culture that taught all of us how to face the music and dance.

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